

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF PURĀṆAS
AND
THEIR RELATION WITH VEDIC LITERATURE

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The Purāṇas are a very important branch of Sanskrit literature. Their common feature is the recounting of tales about ancient kings and heroes, but how these tales originated, who were responsible for preserving and handing them down from generation to generation and when they came to be collected and edited are questions which have exercised the minds of scholars for a long time.

Luckily the Purāṇas themselves throw sufficient light on these questions. The *Vāyu* and *Padma* Purāṇas clearly say that it was the special duty of the sūtas to preserve the genealogies of godly ṛṣis, illustrious kings, and famous heroes.¹ That the institution of sūtas was very ancient is proved by their mention in the Vedic literature. The sūta is mentioned in the *Yajurveda Samhitās* and the *Atharvaveda*.² In the latter he is called *rājakṛt* i. e. king-maker which no doubt means that his duty was to perpetuate the name of his patron by keeping a record of his lineage and achievements. In the *Samhitās* of the *Black Yajurveda* and in two of the *Brāhmaṇas*³ he is one of the eleven ratnins or members of the royal entourage. In post-Vedic period the sūta was both a charioteer and a bard, but this does not seem to have been the case in the Vedic times. Eggeling⁴ thinks that he was in the *Brāhmaṇas* at least a minstrel and a court poet.

The question naturally arises who the sūtas were. According to the *Smṛtis* the son of a Kṣatriya from a Brahman woman was called a sūta. The Vedic sūtas, however, could not have been a mixed caste because in the Vedic period brahmans, kṣatriyas and viśes were classes rather than castes and marriages between them did not result in the birth of persons of mixed castes. Fortunately Kauṭilya dispels all doubts on this subject. According to him the sūta mentioned in the Purāṇas was different from the later sūta

1. *Vāyu*, 31-2; *Padma* V, 1, 27-8.

2. *Kāṭhaka Sam.* XV, 4; *Maitrāyaṇī Sam.* II, 6, 5; *Taittirīya Sam.* I, 8, 9, 1; *Atharvaveda* III, 5, 7.

3. *Taittirīya Brāh.* I, 7, 3, 1; *Śatapatha Brāh.* V, 3, 1, 5.

4. *Sacred Books of the East* 41, 62, n. .

and distinct from both Brahmans and Kṣatriyas.⁵ That he was not a Brahman is proved by the Purāṇas themselves which say that the sūta had no claim at all to the exposition of the Vedas.⁶ It is equally certain that he did not belong to the royal class. It is thus clear that like persons of various other professions he was a viś or commoner.

The material handed down by the sūtas from very early times came to be called purāṇa, a name which appears to be the abridged form of some such words as *purāṇam ākhyānam* i. e. old narrative.⁷ That this narrative existed even in the early Vedic period is proved by the mention of purāṇa with the ṛks, the sāmans and the yajus in the *Atharvaveda*.⁸ When and how this floating narrative was edited and given a definite shape is also recorded in some of the Purāṇas. According to them, Vyāsa, who lived at the time of the Bhārata war, compiled a Purāṇa Samhitā with tales, anecdotes, songs and lore that had come down from ages.⁹ There is also a tradition preserved in the Purāṇas which informs us that the original Purāṇa dealt not only with ancient genealogies and accounts of persons mentioned in the genealogies but also with three other topics viz. creation, dissolution, and the ages of the progenitors of mankind.¹⁰ It thus appears that Vyāsa incorporated in his Purāṇa Samhitā not only the genealogies and stories of kings and ṛsis handed down by the sūtas, but also the ancient lore about the origin, duration and dissolution of the world.

This Purāṇa Samhitā was given the final form five generations later in the reign of the Bhārata king Adhisīmakṣṇa by the sūta Lomaharṣaṇa¹¹ who has been mistakenly called a disciple of Vyāsa. Thus the original Purāṇa Samhitā was completed about 900 B. C. if we regard the Bhārata war to have taken place about 1000 B. C. The history of the kings who followed Adhisīmakṣṇa continued to be added but it was written in the future tense to mark off the time of the original compilation. Some Purāṇas further inform us that three of the pupils of Lomaharṣaṇa composed three independent Purāṇa Samhitās on the basis of the original Purāṇa Samhitā.¹² Thus the gradual multiplication of the Purāṇas is admitted by

5. *Arthaśāstra* III, 7.

6. *Vāyu* I, 33; *Bhāgavata* I, 4, 13 regards the sūta conversant with the whole realm of literature with the exception of the Veda.

7. Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature* Vol. I, p. 518.

8. XI, 7, 24.

9. *Vāyu* 60, 21; *Brahmāṇḍa* II, 34, 21; *Viṣṇu* III, 6, 16.

10. *Vāyu* 4, 10-11; *Brahmāṇḍa* I, 1, 37-8, *Matsya* 53, 65; *Viṣṇu* III, 6, 25 etc.

11. The most ancient of the Purāṇas *Vāyu*, *Brahmāṇḍa* and *Matsya* profess to have been narrated by the sūta Lomaharṣaṇa in the reign of Adhisīmakṣṇa.

12. *Vāyu* 61, 55-62; *Brahmāṇḍa* II, 35, 63-70; *Viṣṇu* III, 6, 17-19; *Agni* 270, 10-13.

the ancient Purāṇas themselves which do not bear out the later belief that all the Purāṇas were composed by Vyāsa.

That there was originally only one Purāṇa Samhitā need not be doubted. The contention of Winternitz that there never was one original Purāṇa any more than there was one original Brāhmaṇa whence all the Brāhmaṇas sprang or one original Upaniṣad whence all the Upaniṣads sprang¹³ is a counsel of despair. The learned scholar forgot that no ancient Indian work has ever claimed that all the Brāhmaṇas sprang from one Brāhmaṇa or that all the Upaniṣads sprang from one Upaniṣad, whereas the Purāṇas clearly and indubitably assert that there was originally only one Purāṇa Samhitā.

It now remains to be seen how the original Purāṇa was transformed into the present Purāṇas. We have seen that already a few decades after the compilation of the original Purāṇa Samhitā three independent Purāṇa Samhitās sprang up. It is recorded in one of the Purāṇas that the sūta Lomahaṇṣa got this name because his recitation of the Purāṇas before the ṛṣis performing a twelve-year sacrifice in the Naimiṣa forest thrilled the audience and made their hair erect.¹⁴ This must not have been the only occasion on which it was narrated. It must have been usual to recite it in public assemblies and the people must have heard the deeds of their national heroes with delight. As time passed this recitation must have become more and more popular and must have attracted ever-increasing number of listeners. This popularity was naturally exploited by the priests of different sects who began gradually to appropriate the Purāṇas for expounding the religious doctrines of their own sects. These persons were, moreover, not, as Winternitz rightly says, the learned Brahmans, the Veda-knowers, but the rather uneducated temple priests who used them for the glorification of the deities whom they served and in later times more and more for the recommendation of the temples and places of pilgrimages in which they maintained and often enriched themselves.¹⁵ The contents as well as the number of Purāṇas thus continued to multiply till it was recognized that the Purāṇas are eighteen in number.

The internal evidence of the Purāṇas makes it absolutely clear that they were written at widely different times. As a rule the later the Purāṇa, the more its historical matter is burdened with explanatory myths and the latest Purāṇas are altogether relieved of historical matter. Reversely the

13. *History of Indian Literature* Vol. I, p. 522.

14. *Vāyu* 1, 16.

15. *History of Indian Literature* Vol. I, pp. 528-9.

older the Purāṇa, the less its genealogies are burdened with myths and the more they approximate to the Vedic evidence. Judged from this the oldest Purāṇas, so far as genealogies and accounts of persons mentioned in the genealogies are concerned, are the *Brahma*, the *Vāyu*, the *Brahmāṇḍa* and the *Matsya*, all of which purport to be narrated by the sūta Lomaharṣaṇa. Later than these four but older than the others is the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. Seven other Purāṇas, the *Bhāgavata*, the *Garuḍa*, the *Agni*, the *Padma*, the *Linga*, the *Kūrma* and the *Mārkaṇḍeya* contain historical matter in varying degree. Among the remaining Purāṇas the *Bhaviṣya* professedly does not deal with the ancient past and the other five viz. the *Nārada*, the *Brahma-vaivarta*, the *Varāha*, the *Vāmana* and the *Skanda* are purely sectarian works free from all historical matter.

The chronology of the Purāṇas, however, is not as easy as this. For instance the *Brahma*, whose genealogical account is ancient, contains other material which is comparatively quite late. On the other hand the *Mārkaṇḍeya* whose genealogical material is not of much value yet appears to be quite ancient if we judge it from the other material that it contains. It is the least sectarian of the Purāṇas which tended to become more and more sectarian with the passage of time. If we cast a glance over the entire contents of the Purāṇas the oldest Purāṇas appear to be the *Vāyu*, the *Brahmāṇḍa*, the *Matsya*, the *Viṣṇu* and the *Mārkaṇḍeya* all of which must have been composed by the 4th century A. D. although the *Matsya* and the *Mārkaṇḍeya* contain some material which appears to be much later. The first four of these Purāṇas contain the lists of kings who ruled in the Kali age and this list ends with the foundation of the Gupta dynasty in the beginning of the 4th century A. D.

There is another way of judging the relative chronology of some of the Purāṇas. The *Viṣṇu* contains the oldest version of the Kṛṣṇa story. The versions of the *Brahma* and the *Bhāgavata* are later and those of the *Padma* and the *Brahmavaivarta* which mention the name of Rādhā are later still. This proves that the *Brahma* to a large extent and the *Bhāgavata* wholly are later than the *Viṣṇu*, while the *Padma* and the *Brahmavaivarta* came later still. Since Alberuni mentions all the Purāṇas they must all have been composed by 1000 A. D.

The historical value of the Purāṇic genealogies and the accounts of persons mentioned in the genealogies is to be judged by the veracity of the dynastic lists of the Kali age, for they can be checked by the evidence of the Buddhist literature, dramas and inscriptions. The only two serious mistakes which have been discovered in these lists are (1) the mention of the names

of Śākya, Śuddhodana, Siddhārtha and Rāhula as predecessors of king Prasenajit of Kosala and (2) the mention of Bimbisāra and his successors as descendants of Śiśunāga and Kākavarṇa. Barring these two mistakes the accounts of the various dynasties that ruled in the Kali age are substantially correct. This therefore means that though later editors have often tampered with the genealogies, they are by no means figments of imagination. The trustworthiness of the earlier genealogies is proved by the fact that the names of many of the famous kings of these genealogies occur in the Vedic literature also and when the latter mentions these names with patronymics the Purāṇic lists are further supported. The greatest mistake in the record of these earlier dynasties is geographical. The Purāṇic editors have located the earlier kings of these dynasties in the same regions in which the later kings ruled. Yet a number of ancient verses preserved in the Purāṇas and the *Mahābhārata* show the real location of these earlier kings in conformity with the Vedic evidence. Thus although the Purāṇas locate Purūravas and his successors Nahuṣa, Yayāti and others in Pratiṣṭhāna or Prayāga, the *Mahābhārata* more than once locates Yayāti on the Sarasvatī in conformity with Vedic evidence.¹⁶ Similarly although the Purāṇas locate the earliest Ikṣvāku kings in Ayodhyā, a famous early king of this dynasty, Māndhātṛ, is regarded by the *Mahābhārata* as having made conquests from Gāndhāra to Yamunā, which means that he ruled in some region west of the Yamunā.¹⁷ Some of the ancient Purāṇas further regard Bhagīratha as having come to the banks of the Gaṅgā with a large number of chariots and given the river his name.¹⁸ This can only mean that he came to the Gangetic valley from some distant region where his ancestors had been ruling. Thus the mistakes committed by the later editors of the Purāṇas are checked by the evidence of the Vedic literature, the *Mahābhārata* and the ancient verses of the Purāṇas themselves.

As far as the genealogies of the ṛṣis are concerned the later Purāṇic editors have taken great liberties with them and have partly mythologized them. Ten ṛṣis are regarded as founders of Brahman families viz. Marīci, Atri, Bhṛgu, Āṅgīrasa, Vasiṣṭha, Agastya, Viśvāmitra, Pulastya, Pulaha and Kratu. The Purāṇas have, however, converted many of them into Prajāpatis or minor creators and have assigned to them both the work of creation and of founding Brahman families. Fortunately the two accounts have been kept more or less separate. The value of the genealogies has therefore, not really been lost.

16. VII, 63, 4; IX, 42, 33.

17. III, 125, 25-6; 126, 43.

18. *Vāyu* 88, 168; *Brahmāṇḍa* III, 63, 167.

Let us now turn to the other three topics which the original Purāṇa Samhitā is believed to have contained. According to the account of creation found in the Purāṇas, Brahmā, the creator, accomplished the work of creation in seven stages after which he created only the inseparable properties of beings. He first created the intellect, the subtle elements, and the inanimate macrocosm perceptible by senses, and then produced in turn the vegetable kingdom, the lower animals, the celestial beings and the human beings.¹⁹ The human beings are thus regarded as the highest creation of Brahmā superior even to the celestial beings. The names of the first human couple are Svāyambhuva Manu and Śatarūpā. Svāyambhuva Manu had two sons and a number of grandsons who divided the whole earth between them. This gives occasion to the Purāṇic editors to give a description of the world, some of which is mythical but some very valuable from the geographical point of view and proves that the colonial and cultural expansion of India in ancient times was by no means insignificant.²⁰

The dissolution of the beings according to the Purāṇas is of three kinds, the *naimittika* or periodical, the *prākṛtika* or natural and the *ātyantika* or absolute. The periodical dissolution takes place after each Kalpa which is equal to a day of Brahma or 4320000000 human years. The natural dissolution takes place when the cosmos merges into Primeval Nature. The absolute dissolution consists of the identity of the individual soul with the Supreme Soul attained through knowledge.²¹

The last topic of the original Purāṇa Samhitā was the description of the periods of Manus or the progenitors of mankind. There can be no doubt that what the present Purāṇas say about the Manvantaras or the periods of Manus is far removed from the original account. The Purāṇas in their present form mention seven past and seven future Manus. So far as the idea of seven future Manus is concerned, it is undoubtedly of very late origin since the *Manusmṛti* mentions only the seven past Manus.²² Moreover, it is clear from the Purāṇas that even of the seven past Manus the intervening five could not have been originally regarded as Manus because they are all described as near descendants of Svāyambhuva or the first Manu and therefore are not separated from each other by the cosmological period of a Manvantara. Thus according to the unanimous testimony of the Purāṇas Svāyambhuva Manu had two sons named Priyavrata and

19. *Vāyu* 6, 60-70; *Viṣṇu* I, 5, 19-26; *Padma* V, 3, 69-75.

20. *Vāyu* 33-49; *Brahmāṇḍa* I, 14-19; *Matsya* 113-14; *Viṣṇu* II, 1-4; *Bhāgavata* V, 16-20.

21. *Viṣṇu* I, 7, 41-3; *Bhāgavata* XII, 4; *Vāyu* 100, 132-34; *Brahmāṇḍa* III, 1, 128-31.

22. I, 61-3.

Uttānapāda. The second, third, fourth and fifth Manus were the sons of Priyavrata²³ and were thus contemporaries of each other and removed from Svāyambhuva Manu only by two generations. The sixth Manu is said to have been a descendant of Svāyambhuva Manu's son Uttānapāda and removed from the latter by five generations according to the *Viṣṇu*, six generations according to the *Bhāgavata* and eight generations according to the *Vāyu* and *Brahmāṇḍa* Purāṇas.²⁴ Vaivasvata Manu, the founder of the ruling families of the Vedic age, alone was really far removed from Svāyambhuva Manu, the primeval ancestor of mankind. It is thus certain that the original Purāṇa Samhitā mentioned only two progenitors of mankind viz. Svāyambhuva Manu and Vaivasvata Manu who belonged to altogether different ages which could be regarded as Manvantaras. It is interesting to note that according to the Bible also there were only two progenitors of mankind belonging to two different periods viz. Adam and Noah. The latter like Vaivasvata Manu was saved from the deluge.

The inter-relation between Manvantaras and yugas according to which seventyone four-yuga periods constitute a Manvantara has undoubtedly been established by the authors of the present Purāṇas without regard to facts, for whereas the Manvantara is clearly a cosmological period, the yuga is not so. It is declared repeatedly in the Purāṇas that the four yugas prevailed only in India.²⁵ The original Purāṇa, it appears, had divided the history of ancient India into four periods which were given the artificial names of Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara and Kali that occur in Vedic literature as the designations of throws at dice.²⁶ If we leave aside the last yuga, which is believed to be still continuing, and look at the Purāṇic list of kings who ruled in the preceding three yugas, we find that the total number of kings does not exceed one hundred. The combined length of the three yugas, therefore, could not have been much more than 2000 years. But by turning the yugas into parts of the cosmological period called Manvantara the authors of the present Purāṇas have given the three yugas a combined length of 3888000 years !

A famous verse occurring in a number of Purāṇas exhorts the readers to reinforce the Veda with the Itihāsa and Purāṇa.²⁷ The Purāṇas thus

23. *Vāyu* 62, 57; *Brahmāṇḍa* I, 36, 65; *Bhāgavata* V, 1, 28; VIII, 1, 23-7; 5, 2.

24. *Viṣṇu* I, 11, 1-3 and 13, 1-3; *Bhāgavata* IV, 8, 6-8 and 13, 6-15; *Vāyu* 62, 76-91; *Brahmāṇḍa* I, 36, 87-102.

25. *Vāyu* 24, 1; 45, 137, 57, 22; *Brahmāṇḍa* II, 16, 68-9; 29, 23; *Matsya* 142, 17; *Brahma* 19, 20; 27, 64; *Viṣṇu* II, 3, 19; *Padma* I, 7, 3; *Linga* I, 52, 32.

26. *Taittirīya Samhitā* IV, 3, 3, 1-2; *Vājasaneyī Samhitā* XXX, 18; *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* III, 4, 1, 16.

27. *Vāyu* 1, 200-1; *Padma* V, 2, 50-2; *Śiva* V, 1, 35.

claim that they were written to amplify the Vedas. This is in a sense true so far as the five topics of the original Purāṇa Saṁhitā are concerned. In fact the Purāṇic genealogies and accounts of persons mentioned in the genealogies may truly be regarded as a secular counterpart of the Vedas. It should, however, be remembered that even the five topics of the original Purāṇa Saṁhitā have suffered much from revision in the present Purāṇas. Most of the material of the present day Purāṇas is religious and in the matter of religion their pretensions cannot be accepted by any impartial person. Let us examine this point at some length.

The religion of the *Ṛgveda* is very simple and there is hardly any room for mythology in it. The later Vedas have also very little of mythology. It is the Brāhmaṇa literature with which real mythology starts. The mythology of the Brāhmaṇas is, however, mostly a natural development of the beliefs recorded in the Vedas, though at places it violates the spirit of the Vedic hymns. Later works like the *Bṛhaddevatā* are much nearer the Purāṇas. As a matter of fact the Purāṇas being mostly sectarian works, their main aim was to extol and elevate their own particular god at the expense of other gods. The Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas were particularly aggressive in this respect. They naturally wanted the exclusive worship of Viṣṇu and since some of the other Vedic gods, particularly Indra, stood in the way of the ascendancy of Viṣṇu, they distorted the Vedic account of this god and even fabricated new stories to bring Indra into disrepute. The truth is that Indra was already a very popular god when the ancestors of the Indians and Iranians were still one people. For this reason Zoroastrianism in Persia and Vaiṣṇavism in India had to face great difficulty in persuading the people not to worship Indra as a competitor of Ahura Mazda and Viṣṇu respectively. The Zoroastrian Avesta therefore converted Indra into a demon and the Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas did everything short of turning him into a demon in order to bring him into disrepute. Let us now see how the Purāṇas distorted the Vedic image of Indra.

One of the chief epithets of Indra in the *Ṛgveda* is *Vṛtrahan*, which he earned as a result of his victory over *Vṛtra*, the demon of drought. This is the greatest exploit of Indra in the *Ṛgveda*. This demon is pictured as a dragon encompassing the waters and by killing him Indra releases water for the mankind and thus acts as the saviour of humanity. In this fight the Maruts are his regular allies but Agni, Soma and Viṣṇu also often assist him. Now let us turn to the Purāṇas. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* has converted the dragon *Vṛtra* into a Brahman by killing whom Indra incurred the sin of Brahmanicide.²⁸ This transformation is in itself amazing but when

28. VI, 12 & 13.

it is added that Vṛtra was a devotee of Viṣṇu, one simply feels astounded for in the *Ṛgveda* Viṣṇu helps Indra in the slaying of Vṛtra.

Another epithet of Indra in the *Ṛgveda* showing his great power is Śatakratu which means one having a hundred powers. This epithet was interpreted by the Purāṇic authors as meaning one who performs a hundred sacrifices and so in consonance with this meaning it was presumed that one who performs a hundred sacrifices becomes Indra. Hence Indra has been shown as being constantly afraid of kings who intend to perform a hundred sacrifices and trying to foil their intention. One such example is that of Pṛthu. Another is that of Sagara. The horses of both were stolen by Indra according to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.²⁹ What a travesty! From a lover of sacrifices in the *Ṛgveda* Indra has been transformed into one who dreads the sacrifices in the Purāṇas.

Yet another epithet of Indra in the Vedas is Ahalyāyai jara which only means favourer of the unploughed land. The personification of Ahalyā began in the Brāhmaṇas but the Purāṇas fabricated a most unseemly story wherein Ahalyā has been depicted as the wife of a ṛṣi named Gautama who pronounces a very ugly curse on Indra for seducing her.³⁰ Thus the ṛṣis who used to worship Indra in the Vedas have been given the role of cursing him in the Purāṇas.

In the Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas which give the story of Kṛṣṇa, Indra has been several times depicted in an unfavourable light in order to prove the superiority of Kṛṣṇa. A notable example is the incident of Kṛṣṇa's substituting the worship of the Govardhana hill for that of Indra and Indra's subsequent wrath and humiliation.³¹ Another example is provided by Kṛṣṇa's invasion of Indra's heaven for carrying away the Pārijāta tree in order to satisfy the whim of his wife Satyabhāmā and for bringing about Indra's complete debacle.³²

Another feature of the Purāṇic Indra is his fear of the demons for which he constantly seeks the aid of human kings. Sometimes even human kings are represented as subduing him.³³ He is also afraid of ascetics who by their austerities can capture heaven and so whenever any ascetic performs severe austerities Indra sends some Apsaras to distract his mind.³⁴ Thus

29. IV, 19, 10-11; IX, 8, 8.

30. *Brahma* 87; *Padma* V, 51.

31. *Viṣṇu* V, 10-12; *Brahma* 187-88; *Bhāgavata* X, 24, 7.

32. *Viṣṇu* V, 30; *Brahma* 203; *Bhāgavata* X, 59, 39-40.

33. See the story of Rāji and his sons, *Vāyu* 92, 75-90; *Brahmaṇḍa* III, 67, 80-96; *Matsya* 24, 35-43; *Viṣṇu* IV, 9; *Bhāgavata* IX, 17, 12-15.

34. See the story of Kaṇḍu in *Brahma* 178.

in the hands of the Purāṇic authors the Vedic Indra has been transformed beyond recognition.

What applies to Indra applies in a lesser degree to the other great Vedic god Varuṇa because of his much less popularity. This omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent god of the Vedas has become a god of pools and puddles in the Purāṇas. One example from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*³⁵ will suffice to show how completely he has been shorn of his greatness by the Purāṇas. Once when Nanda, the fosterfather of Kṛṣṇa, went to bathe in the Yamunā a servant of Varuṇa made him a captive and took him to Varuṇa. When Kṛṣṇa came to know of this he went to Varuṇa who, while beseeching him to take back his father, pacified him by humble prayers and apologies.

Besides the denigrating of Vedic gods, the Purāṇic religion has many other features such as the glorification of temples, the consecration of images and the appeasement of planets which cannot be called the amplification of what we find in the Vedas. Thus the claim of the Purāṇas that they reinforce the Vedas cannot stand the test of scrutiny at least in the sphere of religion.

That does not, however, in the least mean that the Purāṇas are not valuable documents. In fact, we should be grateful to the authors of the Purāṇas for preserving for us, even in a distorted form, a record of the great deeds of our ancestors from the earliest times to the fourth century A. D. Much of our history would have been a void if the Purāṇas had not come down to us.

35. X, 28,